DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 245 356 EA 016 900

AUTHOR Turnbull, Brenda J.
TITLE Using Governance and Support Systems to Advance School Improvement.
INSTITUTION Dingle Associates, Inc., Washington, D.C.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Jun 83
CONTRACT 400-79-0035
NOTE 41p.; Paper prepared for the National Institute of Education Conference on State and Local Policy Implications of Effective School Research.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Environment; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Federal Aid; Federal Programs; *Federal Regulation; Governance; Government Role; *Government School Relationship; *Public Agencies; *School District Autonomy; *School Support; State School District Relationship

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the complex environment of federal, state, and independent agencies within which school districts operate, and suggests how these agencies, with their demands and resources, can contribute to school improvement when local decision-makers use them for this purpose. Features of these external governance and support systems are reflected in the school systems; one example cited is the parallel differentiation of spheres of authority in the regulatory and support agencies and of program domains within districts and schools (e.g., compensatory, vocational, and special education). Despite the complex and pervasive influence of these external forces, local decision-makers can work productively with outside agencies, requirements, and resources in the following ways: (1) develop strategies for what they wish to accomplish and how external systems can help; (2) match outside resources to the nature of the planned improvement and to the internal resources available; (3) make sure that external resources and demands result in advancing (or not impeding) school improvement; and (4) attend to advantages and disadvantages of segmenting school improvement efforts. As a postscript, state and federal options for reducing the disadvantages of program differentiation are discussed. (TE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

EA

POLICY STUDIES ASSOCIATES, INC.

ELIZABETH R. REISNER
BRENDA J. TURNBULL

1503 TWENTY-FIRST STREET, N. W.
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20036
(202) 296-4460

ED245356

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

USING GOVERNANCE AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS TO ADVANCE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Brenda J. Turnbull

June 1983

EA 016 900

Paper prepared for the National Institute of Education Conference on State and Local Policy Implications of Effective School Research

Contract Number 400-79-0035
Delivery Order Number NIE-D-82-0003CB)

Dingle Associates, Inc.

SUMMARY

Although most of the hard work of improving schools goes on within local school systems, these systems are not isolated from their environments. Instead, many federal, state, and independent agencies constantly present school districts with demands and resources that may affect the course of school improvement. This paper describes the major environmental demands and resources, and it suggests how they can contribute to school improvement when local decisionmakers actively try to use them for this purpose.

School systems operate in a complex environment, interacting with multiple agencies and institutions that administer both requirements and resources. Merely listing the most salient of these can give a sense of the complexity and overlap that exist. The outside officials with whom school-district staff interact include the staffs of many offices within state education agencies, the corresponding staffs of several federal program offices, people from intermediate agencies between the state and local level, and resource people in a multitude of special-purpose or regional organizations. The overlapping responsibilities of these agencies and organizations can include rulemaking and monitoring (in federal and state agencies) and dissemination and technical assistance (from all sources).

The requirements that impinge on districts come from a plethora of state and federal civil-rights laws and categorical programs. They include fiscal controls and procedural requirements intended to improve local accountability for the targeting and

quality of services. The resources available to local school systems from diverse support systems include funds, products, information, and technical assistance.

Features of these external governance and support systems are mirrored within school systems. Both school systems and their environments tend to be organized into differentiated program domains. Special education, vocational education, and compensatory education often represent separate spheres of authority within districts and separate spheres of governance and support outside districts. It would be impossible to say to what extent the organizaton of federal and state agencies around differentiated programs has caused the differentiation of the local system. Professional specialization within the field of education has undoubtedly contributed to this phenomenon at all levels. Still, the presence of specialized external systems, each imposing requirements and offering resources, does foster program differentiation and autonomy in districts and schools.

Although the environment of school systems is complex, and although districts and schools are sometimes powerfully buffeted by external forces, this paper argues that local decisionmakers often can make governance and support systems work for them in their efforts to improve schools. There are limits on the extent to which rational planning is feasible in school systems (as in all organizations), but many features of governance and support systems are stable and predictable over time, permitting local educators to plan around them. Moreover, research on educational improvement and on the implementation of categorical programs has

begun to identify ways in which school systems can work productively with outside agencies, requirements, and resources. Distilling practical suggestions from this literature is the major purpose of this paper.

The most basic suggestion is that local decisionmakers should develop strategies concerning what they want to accomplish and how external systems can help them. The evidence suggests that school improvement will fare best when it involves the deliberate orchestration of internal and external resources towards a relatively clear goal. Outside demands and resources sometimes cause districts to respond haphazardly or opportunistically, but a more considered response is often possible and generally desirable.

A related suggestion is that outside resources should be matched to the nature of the planned improvement. This means, for example, that local decisionmakers can take advantage of support systems that are specialized by program areas when their goal is to improve particular programs. Similarly, some types of information or assistance systems are especially useful when an improvement effort is first being designed, while others come into play at later stages of implementation.

Local decisionmakers must recognize that when they tap external resources they also have to invest internal resources--especially staff time--in school improvement. Research shows that outside assistance with school improvement does not come to school districts free of charge, even when there is no special outlay of local dollars, largely because of time that teachers and administrators devote to the improvement process. Although this is not generally

recognized as an investment that involves tradeoffs, it should be. In a similar vein, research points to the contributions that district staff (curriculum coordinators, special-program directors, and the like) make to the improvement process. These internal resource people are instrumental in planning, implementing, and maintaining improvements, although their contributions have often been overlooked in the past.

Another suggestion, however, is that district administrators make sure that external resources and demands, as filtered through the district level, result in advancing (or not impeding) improvement at the school level. District staff sometimes limit the flow of outside resources to schools. Sometimes, too, they allow external legal and fiscal requirements to solidify district-level "empires" that may reduce schools' autonomy. It is not clear that schools have actually lost decisionmaking authority over time, or that having such authority necessarily contributes to a school's improvement, but district administrators should recognize the possibility that some district staff may create barriers to improvement.

Finally, local decisionmakers should attend to the advantages and disadvantages of segmenting school improvement, like other programs, into special projects. Such project differentiation has some benefits, notably the resulting excitement and pride that motivate staff members to put extra effort into improvement. However, in view of the growing sense that school improvement should be comprehensive, differentiation may be somewhat counterproductive. Weighing the costs and benefits in each case therefore seems important.

As a postscript, this paper addresses some state and federal options for reducing the disadvantages of program differentiation. Increasing the communication among the staffs of different programs is the simplest option to implement, although whether this would actually help schools or districts coordinate their programs is not clear. Program consolidation offers the possibility of simplifying the structure of external demands, but past experience suggests that consolidation is often short-lived and often brings reductions in resources. A less dramatic but probably sensible policy would be to allow intergovernmental negotiation and flexibility, encouraging school districts to take the initiative to solve any local problems of program coordination.

USING GOVERNANCE AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS TO ADVANCE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT[1/]

Schools and districts carry out their school-improvement efforts in an environment crowded with governing bodies, special programs, mandates, and resource systems. This paper analyzes ways in which school improvement may be affected by resources and demands originating outside local districts, and it outlines strategies that districts can use in managing these resources and demands. Outside systems of governance and support are important in school improvement because they can potentially enhance or detract from local capacity for educational effectiveness and efficient resource use. For example, a school might become more or less effective because of new state requirements for teacher qualifications; a district might become more or less efficient because of constraints on the use of categorical-program funds.

A contention underlying this paper is that effects such as these do not just happen to schools or districts but instead are mediated through the local response to outside opportunities and constraints. Local decisionmakers actually have considerable discretion in their use of outside resources and even in their response to outside demands. This paper outlines some important dimensions of the resources, the demands, and local strategies for handling them.

[1/]Preparation of this paper was supported by the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Education, under Contract No. 400-79-0035. However, the opinions herein are those of the author, and no endorsement by the Institute or the Department should be inferred.

The first part of the paper describes the governance and support systems that typically surround school districts. "Governance" is defined here as the laws, regulations, and administrative techniques through which federal and state agencies define--and seek to enforce--limits on local discretion in allocating resources and delivering services. Governance systems define the permissible uses of funds and monitor local compliance with the rules. "Support" systems provide resources that include funds, products, technical assistance, or information.

Next, I discuss ways in which school systems and external systems mirror each other's characteristics, especially with respect to program specialization. This second section also addresses the issue of the local implementation of requirements and suggestions that originate outside the district.

In the third section of the paper, I discuss local strategies for using the resources that outside systems provide and coping with the constraints that they present. These strategies are derived from research on school improvement and local program management. In the area of school improvement, research has identified the contributions that outside resources--notably information and technical assistance--make to local change efforts. Research has also identified local activities that effectively leverage these resources. In studies of the local effects of governance structures and program requirements, research findings have pointed to ways in which local managers can handle the constraints of these structures and requirements. My intention in

this paper is to extract practical, concrete suggestions from these bodies of research.

Description of Governance and Support Systems

A wide array of externally determined constraints and opportunities surrounds every school district. The array varies from district to district because of differences in state laws and in state or regional support structures, but typical components and structural features can be identified and discussed here.

Rather than dividing systems into governance on the one hand and support on the other, this discussion covers both together. One reason is that governance and support functions are carried out by the same agencies (e.g., state departments of education). Furthermore, the two types of functions are very often intertwined. For example, categorical funds that support local services are accompanied by governing regulations; technical assistance may deal simultaneously with achieving legal compliance and developing program quality. Indeed, an outside intervention that some people in a local school system view as constraining their options may be viewed by others in the same system as providing support. Thus, the two types of functions are discussed together here.

A crucial feature of any school system's environment is its very complexity. However, for analytic purposes (and at the risk of conveying an incorrect impression of orderliness), it is possible to disentangle the various agencies, requirements, and resources that surround school systems.

Agencies and Their Activities

Local school improvement may be affected by the actions of multiple agencies at all levels of government. At the federal level, the Congress passes laws that impose mandates, furnish resources, or both. The federal executive branch develops regulations, selects the recipients of discretionary grants, monitors state and local compliance, and audits local expenditures of federal funds. The actors in these executive-branch functions are the many program and audit offices within the Department of Education, with important behind-thescenes participation from the Office of Management and Budget.

At the state level, while legislatures enact mandates and appropriations that determine much of the governance and support environment for local school systems, state education agencies (SEAs) are the agencies with which school districts have the most extensive interactions. The SEAs administer the bulk of outside support for local schools, and they enforce most of the federal and state mandates. The SEAs have especially extensive responsibilities in rulemaking, monitoring, and technical assistance, all of which they carry out for both state and federal programs. The nature of these functions has changed over time. For example, assistance to local districts, long a cornerstone of the state role, seems to have evolved in the direction of assistance in complying with requirements and away from assistance with educational improvement (Moore et al., 1983).

Recent research on SEAs has given us a picture of their typical characteristics (Moore et al., 1983; McDonnell & McLaughlin,

1982). Housing multiple programs with different funding sources, and deriving about half of their operating funds from the federal government, many SEAs are highly fragmented agencies in which individual program offices have their own agendas and operating styles. Nevertheless, most SEAs develop some central missions and priorities, and they sometimes succeed in managing their disparate programs in such a way as to advance these priorities.

With federal funds for SEA operations decreasing, SEAs may lose the capacity to maintain their present level of activities. Much will depend on the willingness of state legislatures to appropriate funds for SEA administrative functions, but recent research suggests that legislatures are suspicious of the SEAs, viewing them as too-large bureaucracies (Moore et al., 1983). If this view does not change soon, SEAs will lose staff positions and hence become weaker agencies.

Most states contain some sort of intermediate units between the state and local level. The nature and mission of these units vary dramatically among states, however (Stephens Associates, 1979). In some states, they primarily deliver services, providing instruction in such areas as special and vocational education. In others, they are branches of the SEA, with functions that are primarily regulatory. Still other states have intermediate units that mainly provide dissemination and technical assistance for local districts. Especially when the intermediate units take this last form, different districts within the state have widely differing amounts of interaction with them.

Nationwide, many networks of organizations provide information and assistance to school systems. These include the regional laboratories funded by the National Institute of Education, the National Diffusion Network, and several specialized networks concentrating on such areas as bilingual education or the evaluation of compensatory-education programs. Districts can almost always choose whether or not to use these networks, although sometimes state officials give a district a strong push in the direction of using them.

To summarize, districts interact with numerous outside organizations, including agencies like SEAs that contain multiple, diverse components (e.g., specialized program offices). Each may carry out several different activities requiring different local responses. However, this overview of agencies and activities makes little sense without a more substantive discussion of the requirements communicated and enforced and the support provided. We turn first to the requirements.

Laws and Regulations

Some of the laws and regulations most relevant to school improvement are the mandates intended to maintain or upgrade educational quality for all students. Enacted at the state level, these mandates cover such matters as school facilities, teacher qualifications, salaries, curricular requirements, and testing for students or teachers. Some states have mandated planning processes at the district or building level; according to Peterson (Note 1), 18 states require district-level planning and 9 require school-level planning.

Because the traditional federal role in the substance of education is extremely limited, the federal government has enacted no mandates aimed at general educational improvement. Federal mandates deal with civil rights and services for special populations, prohibiting discrimination or (as in the Education for All Handicapped Children Act) requiring appropriate services. Such mandates have two major implications for local school-improvement efforts. First, they imply that all groups, including special student populations, should benefit from efforts to improve services. Second, by requiring districts to pay for special services that are sometimes costly, they may limit what can be spent on across-the-board improvement.

States, too, have mandated educational services for special populations. They cover some of the same populations that federal mandates cover; the handicapped, for whom special services are prescribed in all states, are a notable example. In addition, the states have singled out other special groups for service. Students with low academic achievement are entitled to special services in the many states that require remedial services for students who fail mandated competency tests.

A substantial amount of the legal and regulatory structure affecting local school systems is associated with federal and state categorical programs, and most districts are subject to the provisions of a wide range of these programs. Federal programs for special populations serve the handicapped, the disadvantaged, those of limited English proficiency, and several smaller groups such as Native Americans and children of migrant workers.

Through mandates or categorical funding, all states provide for special services for the handicapped. Twenty-three states also have special funding programs for the disadvantaged, and 30 states have laws that mandate or permit programs for students of limited English proficiency (Winslow & Peterson, 1981).

Whether the purpose is to serve a special student population or to support improvement projects, governments impose requirements in an effort to ensure adherence to a categorical program's purposes. The fiscal controls on categorical dollars (such as maintenance of effort and "supplement-not-supplant") reflect the belief that districts should provide a stable base of services for all students and add specially funded services on top of this base. One effect, then, is to induce districts to set up separate program components that address the categorical purposes. These fiscal controls appear even in Chapter 2 of the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act (ECIA), which replaced some 28 small federal programs in narrowly defined subject areas with a more flexible block grant.

A few categorical-program provisions are intended to influence the design of instruction. For example, statutory lists of authorized activities influence program design by showing what districts can do with little fear of challenge from auditors or monitors. Discretionary grant programs have funding criteria that may specify preferred instructional designs. Even more commonly, regulations contain procedural requirements intended to improve the quality and appropriateness of local programs. For example, many programs require needs assessment or planning that involves parents or teachers.

To complete this discussion of the components of governance and support systems, we turn now to the types of support that school districts obtain from their environment.

Resources

The supporting resources available to school districts from outside sources include funds, products, information, and technical assistance. Nationwide, most of the funds spent on public education come from nonlocal sources; the average figures are 47 percent state funds, 9 percent federal, and 44 percent local (National Center for Education Statistics, 1981).

Much outside funding is earmarked in one way or another. For example, a state may specify that its funds are to be spent only for teacher salaries. Categorical funds, as discussed above, are earmarked for particular populations or activities. Nevertheless, federal and state governments are often viewed as providers of slack resources, either because the categorical program's purpose is to support projects for local improvement (as in Chapter 2 and most of its predecessor programs) or because the controls on program spending are too weak to prevent local managers from substituting outside dollars for local ones (thus freeing up the local resources for the district's own priorities).

The products that school districts obtain from outside sources include not only the textbooks and equipment offered by the private sector but also a variety of products developed and disseminated by public agencies. Some of these are conventional, tangible items like textbooks, while others are model projects for replication and adaptation. Federal seed-money programs (now defunct, for the

most part) have supported the development of many of these model projects, which continue to be disseminated through federal and state networks.

Information is a resource available to school districts through countless formal and informal channels. The information offered by government agencies and the organizations they sponsor may deal with legal requirements or educational substance, and it may be offered through more or less specialized channels.

Finally, as discussed above, outside agencies provide technical assistance--a resource of major importance in local school improvement. Research indicates that successful school improvement is promoted by assistance from both generalists, who steer local staff toward useful resources, and specialists, who furnish information and training on specific topics or help in the adoption of particular products (Louis, Rosenblum, & Molitor, 1981).

Local Responses to External Systems

So far, this paper has discussed the systems outside school districts that provide governance and support. At this point, I turn to the ways in which these systems intersect with local ones--structural features of school districts and schools that correspond to external structures, and effects of governance and support on local educational and administrative practices.

Differentiation of Programs

Most of the requirements and resources reaching districts from outside, like the administrative units within outside agencies, are organized around types of programs. In some cases,

this differentiation results in reasonably close coordination of the governance and support systems associated with particular programs. For example, programs of special education and vocational education have requirements spelled out and enforced by the same units within federal and state agencies that provide information and technical assistance. In each of these program systems, there are other agencies that provide specialized information and assistance. As a whole, then, these systems comprise laws, regulations, administrative activities, and supporting resources, organized around the pursuit of the programmatic goals of serving handicapped students and providing vocational instruction.

Other program systems are less tightly orchestrated. For example, compensatory education includes the federal and state administration of Chapter 1 of ECIA and also the administration of state compensatory programs, which typically serve somewhat different students. Only a few states manage the federal and state compensatory programs together (McDonnell & McLaughlin, 1982), and they are still obliged to keep each program identifiable at the local level for audit purposes.

In the area of school improvement, the coordination of external requirements, resources, and activities into overall systems is even weaker. Federal programs for school improvement have been small and poorly coordinated with each other (Turnbull, 1982). With the very recent increase in popular concern about the quality of education, states are launching multiple initiatives but not necessarily coordinating them with other preexisting programs.

Locally, school systems are generally organized around programs, just as external systems are (Knapp, Stearns, Turnbull, David, & Peterson, 1983). Special education and vocational education often enjoy considerable autonomy within districts and schools. Compensatory education may be one or two autonomous program domains, depending on how the state program (if there is one) is organized. Specialization within the district mirrors the specialization found in outside systems, and it is impossible to say which caused which. Indeed, the existence of professional specialization in such fields as special education is presumably responsible for some of the programmatic differentiation at all levels.

However, educational practice is not always neatly divided into programmatic chunks--although the existence of differentiated governance and support systems provides a strong incentive for dividing it this way. For example, although students in the target groups identified in federal and state laws often go to special, "pullout" classes, the same students also participate in other parts of the school's overall instructional program. This has important implications for school-improvement efforts. The growing interest in comprehensive, schoolwide improvement is in tension with the predominance of separate, differentiated programs within schools.

In order to coordinate the multiple programs within schools, and to effect improvement that cuts across students' entire instructional experience, local decisionmakers must overcome barriers that arise at the federal, state, and local levels. Coordination

across program systems is weak at all levels, partly because the governance and support systems are hard to bring into harmony even within specialized program domains, and partly because coordination is chronically difficult to achieve within or among agencies. As Seidman (1970) points out, there is little incentive for government officials to pay more than lip service to goal of coordination:

> Coordination is rarely neutral. To the extent that it results in mutual agreement or a decision on some policy, course of action, or inaction, inevitably it advances some interests at the expense of others or more than others. (p. 168)

Later in this paper, I will return to the issue of program differentiation, its advantages and disadvantages, and what local decisionmakers or others might do to overcome the disadvantages.

Formal Lines of Responsibility

Another structural feature of the local system is that the district, not the school, is responsible for interactions with outside systems. This results in part from the legal status of school districts: they, not schools, are empowered to receive and spend funds; and they, not schools, are held accountable for compliance with laws and regulations. The fact that district officials are often gatekeepers for outside resources (Turnbull, 1981) and enforcers of outside requirements (Knapp et al., 1983) is very important in the context of school-improvement efforts. Reforms should be centered on the school as the organizational unit, according to a growing body of research, but reforms that are driven by outside requirements or that tap outside resources must be channeled through the district.

Recently, however, some states have taken steps to work directly with schools. New York's Resource Allocation Plan assigns SEA employees as special liaison and assistance representatives for high schools whose students have poor basic skills. Several New England states have staff members who participate in workshops with school staff. California, under the former chief state school officer, required multi-program plans from individual schools. Nevertheless, in all states, districts retain their legal and fiscal authority and accountability.

Local Implementation

The effects of governance and support systems on local educational practice have been described and analyzed in a great many studies of local program implementation. Thanks to this research, policymakers and researchers alike know that they should be skeptical about the effects of central policy on local practice. Policy initiatives are known to give rise to local adaptation and intergovernmental negotiation (Williams & Elmore, 1976; Berman & McLaughlin, 1978); teachers are known to depart from statutory edicts in order to make their work manageable (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). Decisions on student placement, program design, and the like reflect the wide variation in local circumstances and preferences.

This line of research is summarized by Schon (1981) in a discussion of central initiatives related to curriculum:

> Practitioners engaged in the actual delivery of services have discretionary freedom through which they can transform, distort, or resist central policy. Administrators are always

> dependent "downward." Central's efforts to reassert its dominance through evaluation tied to "carrots and sticks" produces games of control and escape from control. (p.59)

Whether a central government's goal is local adherence to mandated practices (such as procedures for identifying and serving handicapped students) or local attention to centralized leadership in the pursuit of educational excellence, these researchers warn that local practitioners will not respond uniformly or predictably.

Nevertheless, governance and support systems do affect what is done in districts and schools. A study of the local cumulative effects of federal programs and policies (Knapp et al., 1983) found several broad-gauge effects across a diverse sample of districts. Although individual program provisions did not have uniform effects across districts, their sum total made a real and surprisingly consistent difference in important respects: students gained increased access to services locally viewed as appropriate; and the underlying principles of the special programs, such as the desirability of extra services for some students, attained widespread acceptance. Accordingly, in discussing the local response to outside constraints and opportunities, it is important to distinguish between the details of program implementation, which will probably vary among districts and depart from the intentions of program planners, and the broader effects that can be found with some consistency across districts and schools.

The effects of governance and support systems on local administration have also been studied. For example, Cohen (1982) claims that the segmentation among central governance systems engenders a

corresponding differentiation and fragmentation in local management; more middle managers join the district staff, each having a special area of responsibility but none having much effective authority. Program coordination, Cohen says, is largely delegated to schools. Similarly, Meyer (1979) identifies an increase in rituals of control at the district level, but with little connection to school-level practice. He asserts that there is "a massive middle-level educational bureaucracy, poorly linked with the classroom world below, little integrated around broad educational policies or purposes, and organized around reporting to a fragmented wider funding and control environment" (p. 25).

In analyzing the local effects of governance and support systems and in deriving recommendations for local officials who must manage the constraints and opportunities these systems present, it is important to remember that "the local level" is not a monolith. Local practices in instruction and administration emerge from compromises among many parties, including teachers, principals, line managers, staff personnel, superintendents, parents, school board members, and others. Any of these parties may respond to the constraints and incentives offered by outside systems, and these effects may shift over time.[2/] For example, a mandate for parent involvement in planning the school program could initially enhance the authority of parents and reduce that of principals; over time,

---

[2/]The indeterminate and shifting character of local authority is an issue underlying the next major section of this paper, in which I discuss ways of using outside governance and support systems for constructive local purposes. The questions of who is in a position to use them and for what precise aims are not resolved here since the answers are different in every situation.

however, some principals would doubtless find that parents were useful allies in negotiating with central district administrators over how much authority would be exercised at the building level. Thus the authority relationships within the district shift in various ways as a result of an outside mandate.

Strategies for the Use of Outside Systems

Research points to more and less fruitful ways in which local decisionmakers can manage their responses to the constraints and opportunities presented by outside systems of governance and support. Several principles emerge for directing these outside forces toward the goal of school improvement. I use the word "directing" deliberately here, because experience with program implementation proves that local decisionmakers can greatly influence the local effects of outside systems. While there are limits on the feasibility of implementing rational plans in school systems (as in all organizations), decisionmakers still can anticipate many of the external and internal factors likely to affect school improvement. Thus, with allowances for unexpected developments, it is often possible to chart a course and achieve much of what is originally intended.

Have a Strategy

This first principle is simple and crucial. If a district makes haphazard or opportunistic responses to outside forces, it misses the chance to use the resources they offer. Several years ago, a large study of federally sponsored change programs resulted in the conclusion that local projects were much more likely to

persist when they had originally been developed to serve local purposes (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978). For example, a project likely to be successful in the long term might have grown out of a broad based desire in the district office and the schools to increase the individualization of basic-skills instruction. The researchers contrasted this "problem-solving" orientation to the "opportunistic" response of some districts to special funds. In the latter case, when projects were developed merely to fit outside guidelines, the projects tended to peter out quickly, wasting not only the outside funds but also the local resources invested in developing and implementing projects.

A recent set of case studies of educational-improvement efforts (Huberman & Miles, 1983) yielded a similar conclusion about local administrators' approaches to change projects. When administrators were clear about what they wanted to accomplish and conveyed this sense of direction to the teachers and others implementing the projects, the results were judged more successful. Furthermore, these researchers concluded that ambitious, large-scale change efforts were more likely to produce good results than more modest efforts. Overhauling the elementary and secondary reading program, for example, would tend to work out better than adding a unit to the curriculum. Both of these findings have important implications for the local use of outside resources. Not only would administrators do well to make their aims very clear in improvement efforts, but they can achieve good results with the large-scale projects that may involve orchestrating multiple types of resources.

Organizing environmental constraints and opportunities so that they support local school improvement is, of course, easier said than done. However, administrators who can anticipate the mandates facing them and the resources available to them may find that these outside forces provide useful leverage for school improvement. It has not been uncommon for local officials to blame federal mandates for policies that are locally unpopular but that they themselves favor (Knapp et al., 1983). This tactic, generally used in connection with civil-rights mandates, could be used with mandates for quality improvement as well.

Administrators who have been successful in winning special-purpose grants comment that they decide what they want to do, then find a funding source that fits the purpose. One local superintendent discussed his satisfaction with seed-money programs this way:

> The proponents of the formula allocation for block grants say, "You no longer have to worry about the federal government telling you what to do." They never told me what to do. I just wrote the grants and they sent me the checks; they never interfered. (Lannon, 1982, p. 533)

In short, local administrators often can make plans for their responses to outside constraints and resources, and the existence of such plans seems to contribute to success. Moreover, they can fit the strategy to the intended improvement. This is the next principle I discuss.

Match the Resources to the Planned Improvement

While many requirements and some relationships with outside agencies are mandatory for districts, others are voluntary. District staff can choose to become more heavily involved with the

governance and support systems that fit their particular school-improvement agendas most closely. To take a simple example, an effort to improve the connection of high-school vocational education with the regional job market would involve tapping some of the many information and assistance systems available to vocational educators.

Resource systems are not specialized just by program area. They may also specialize in resources that fit particular stages of a local improvement process. For example, it would be logical and possible for a district contemplating an improvement effort to turn sequentially to an information system, a resource base of R&D findings and products, and then a technical-assistance system that would help in the implementation of the locally planned project. In some instances, resource systems assist districts in doing this. The R&D Utilization (RDU) program formerly funded by NIE helped guide districts through such a sequence (Louis et al., 1981), as have organizations within other technical-assistance networks (Turnbull, 1981). However, someone in a district office could independently find the resources that would fit into this kind of sequence simply by contacting a few resource systems that he or she already knew about.

In addition, resource systems can be matched to the scope of the local improvement effort. An important research finding is that relatively modest changes in teachers' classroom practice appear to come about through a process that is entirely different from the process of implementing major organizational changes (Crandall, Bauchner, Loucks, & Schmidt, Note 2). Significant

amounts of outside help are not necessary in implementing the smaller-scale changes. Instead, the predictors of success are teacher commitment and elapsed time. Although outside assistance is sometimes used to promote modest classroom-level changes, neither the type of assistance offered nor the time spent on implementation activities turns out to affect the outcome. Thus, when modest change in teachers' classroom practice is the goal, administrators probably should not waste their own resources in tapping outside assistance resources.

Thus, administrators can make choices that result in a better fit between their aims and the outside support they use. Support systems are differentially appropriate for particular program areas, particular stages in improvement, and projects of large or small scope.

Leverage Outside Resources with Local Resources

Two recent research findings have especially powerful implications for the local management of external resource opportunities, and their common element is the observation that local investments of staff time are crucial in order to make the most of these opportunities. First, school improvement and other types of change efforts demand that participants invest substantial amounts of time that would otherwise be spent doing something else. Second, district staff members very often play an active and vital role in drawing on outside resource systems.

The first finding emerged clearly from a cost study conducted as part of the evaluation of the RDU program (Louis et al., 1981). The evaluators gathered and analyzed detailed data on the actual

costs for local sites of participation in the program, under which they designed and implemented educational-improvement projects using R&D products or exemplary practices from other districts. Included were both "direct" costs (expenditures out of the RDU grant to the site) and "in-kind" costs (such as the contribution of teachers' and administrators' time to RDU activities when other funding sources were paying for their time). On average, in-kind costs exceeded direct costs substantially, with an overall ratio of $4 of in-kind costs for every $1 of direct costs. Staff time was the largest component of the total cost, accounting for $3.80 for every $1 of nonpersonnel costs.

When the evaluators looked at costs in relation to project outcomes, they found that the proportion of the costs not supported directly out of the federal RDU grant had a significant positive relationship with the eventual extent and longevity of change in practice. Thus, in-kind contributions were not only sizable but also important. Looking more closely, the evaluators found that investments of staff time during the early stages of project implementation had the greatest positive relationship with eventual outcomes. Large amounts of staff time spent at an even earlier point, that of deciding what problem to address in the local project, had a negative relationship with eventual success. It seems, in short, that a wise administrator should place some limit on the amount of time spent in preliminary planning but should then authorize substantial contributions of staff time to the process of getting a new program under way.

Another finding of the RDU cost study suggests, however, that administrators may not typically think this way. According to the final report:

> ...when asked about the overall level of resource use and costs, even after the completion of their projects, many [project participants] had little idea of the types and amounts of resources they had used and what the costs of the resource use had been. Indeed, both before and during project activities, site-level personnel involved in RDU activities had little idea about their resource needs for the completion of their projects. This suggests that site-level staff are likely to underestimate resource needs and costs when planning activities similar to the RDU project. (p. 221)

This finding has broader implications for the way in which researchers and decisionmakers think about school-improvement efforts. It is possible that local perceptions of the costs of these efforts, which form the information base for much research and practice, significantly underestimate the true costs. More effective schools may not be attained with as modest an investment as we might think, especially when the hidden costs of volunteer labor and tradeoffs against other activities are taken into account.

Further details on the specific uses of local personnel time that contribute to project success have emerged from a study of school improvement under several dissemination or seed-money programs (Cox, Note 3). In studying sites that made changes with help from these outside programs, the researchers found that nearly half of the sites had someone identifiable as a "local facilitator"--a member of the district-level staff who became an advocate and organizer for the improvement effort. These people carried out most of the same functions that the assistance providers in outside resources systems did. In fact, they spent more time on these

functions that did the outside resource people. Local facilitators sought commitment from teachers and administrators, arranged training, secured materials, planned schedules and procedural details for implementation, evaluated the change in practice, and planned for continuation. Using as outcome measures the extent to which teachers charged their practices, the details of a new practice were mastered, and the new practice was faithfully adopted, these researchers found that the combination of local facilitators plus external facilitators was usually associated with more positive outcomes than the presence of external facilitators alone.

I have described these research findings in some detail because they seem to have especially clear, practical implications for the local management of outside support systems. They suggest that administrators can invest local resources, particularly staff time, in such a way as to increase the likelihood that external resources will be of benefit. First, administrators should recognize that staff members make these investments. Second, they may want to limit the time spent on initial diagnosis and planning. Third, they should encourage district-level facilitators who champion and support improvement efforts.

Attend to Effects at the School Level

From the school perspective, the district office is itself part of the outside environment of governance and support. Earlier in this paper, I discussed the fact that external governance and support systems interact primarily with districts. Administrators should therefore pay attention to the handling of constraints and resources at the district level, which shapes the effects that

outside systems have on schools. Some important effects include what resources from support systems reach schools, how much discretion school staff have when implementing program requirements and mandates, and whether the school has difficulty in coordinating multiple programs.

The issue of what outside resources reach schools deserves some examination. One small-scale study, intended to investigate whether the existence of multiple federal programs of dissemination and technical assistance was confusing or troublesome to people in schools, produced the finding that people in schools had very limited contact with such programs (Turnbull, 1981). District staff, in handling the interactions with dissemination and technical-assistance systems, screened out many offers of help before the offers could reach the school level.

However, a larger and more recent study of support systems found that sometimes people working in these systems made their initial contact with the school, not the district (Cox, Note 3). This was most often true in state-run systems (occurring 70 percent of the time in a sample of 23 local sites that had worked with these systems) and least often true for dissemination efforts aimed at improvement in a federal categorical program (where 25 percent of the initial contacts were with schools in a sample of 32 sites). This discrepancy in findings may well reflect the recent tendency for state personnel to try to work directly with schools.

Besides losing out on some information and assistance when district staff act as gatekeepers, schools may also suffer from a

lack of discretion or authority. Cohen (1982) and Meyer (1979) say the proliferation of federal and state programs has eroded much of the discretionary authority of the school. Looking in more detail at the way in which outside requirements reach the school level, researchers in a recent study (Knapp et al., 1983) found that both states and districts have incentives to tighten the terms of the requirements reaching them from higher levels in order to avoid any blame for local transgressions. Then, with requirements that have been defined increasingly stringently at each successive level, school staff sometimes interpret the requirements even more conservatively, just to be safe.

This implies that, if schools are hemmed in by restrictive regulations, part of the remedy may be found at the local level. District administrators who define requirements stringently in order to protect their management turf (or in the belief that they are fulfilling their responsibilities) may be partly to blame.

Still, the fact that authority is exercised at the district level does not have to mean that schools lose authority. As Cohen (1982) and Knapp and his colleagues (1983) have pointed out, the presence of multiple programs and mandates tends to multiply the opportunities for exercising authority at all decisionmaking levels, including the school. Principals have more resources in their schools about which they can make decisions, even when some of the other decisions that they formerly made alone are now shared with district officials.

Related to the issue of school-level decisionmaking is the issue of program coordination within schools. District administrators

should pay attention to whether they are imposing an excessive or impossible coordination task on their schools by simply passing along (or elaborating on) the many requirements that external governance systems introduce into the district. Attaining a coherent focus on instructional goals within the building may be prohibitively difficult when different goals are introduced by each one of an array of separate programs operating in the schools.

From limited evidence, however, it appears that many schools do succeed in coordinating their programs and that many districts help them do so (Knapp et al., 1983). Teachers who work with the same students in different programs coordinate their lessons, often with encouragement from principals or the district-level directors of special programs. Some superintendents have reorganized their district staffs in order to reduce the independent authority of the special-program directors; by bringing these programs under the management of line administrators (e.g., the director of elementary and secondary education), they have tried to increase the consistency of goals and methods across programs.

In summary, while district staff can advance school improvement, their responses to external governance and support systems can potentially impede school improvement as well. Local decision-makers should be alert to possible problems such as inadequate resources reaching schools, a lack of discretionary authority in schools, or difficulties in coordinating instructional programs.

The differentiation of a school's instructional program into separate components is not always traceable to federal, state, or

local governance, however. The very effort to improve the program may have this effect, as I discuss next.

Assess the Costs and Benefits of Program Segmentation

People in districts and schools tend to design programs, including school-improvement programs, as discrete projects that are somehow separate from regular instructional activities. Outside requirements have encouraged this tendency; for example, federal seed-money programs have fostered the development of special projects (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978). Even the Chapter 2 block grant, which is supposed to be available for any local purpose related to educational quality, has a supplement-not-supplant requirement that compels districts to design identifiable projects. And a program that was launched with the intention of improving coordination among multiple local projects, the School Improvement Program in California, has come to be viewed simply as one more categorical program to be implemented separately (David, forthcoming).

There are also purely local incentives for separating programs from each other. Participants in a special project can develop the enthusiasm and esprit de corps that sustain them through the difficult chores of implementation. In addition, since research says that the leaders of improvement efforts often gain greater job mobility (Huberman & Miles, 1983), we can surmise that some participants are eager to attain the personal visibility that comes with special projects.

All these factors conflict with the idea that schools may benefit more from coherence in their overall direction than from

the presence of many special little endeavors. In some cases, too, opportunities for simple, labor-saving coordination between projects are missed. A study of school-improvement projects (Turnbull, 1981) identified one small district in which the two people conducting tutoring projects never worked together, and a school in which teachers worked independently to develop two curricula with similar aims until a teacher finally realized that materials from one project could easily be adapted for use in the other.

There is no simple way to decide to what extent projects should be segmented within schools and districts, but local decisionmakers would do well to examine the costs and benefits carefully in each instance.

State and Federal Policy Options

The primary focus of this paper is at the local level, but my conclusions about the local use of governance and support systems have implications for steps that state or federal governments might take to modify these systems in the interest of school improvement. Improving the coordination among programs is a concern of policymakers at these levels of government, and various options for coordination are worth considering.

One ostensibly simple administrative option is to increase the communication among program offices. The rationale is that this will help prevent the transmission of conflicting signals or duplicative resources to districts and schools. However, as Moore and her colleagues (1983) argue, there is no compelling

reason to believe that staff meetings at the state level will translate into any improvement in service coordination at the local level. Such meetings are most likely to be pro forma exercises that do not result in substantive change in the demands or resources associated with each separate program. In the past, according to Moore, efforts to coordinate SEA administration in this rather limited way have not been viewed as successful.

A more dramatic option is to consolidate programs into broader-purpose block grants. The future implementation of Chapter 2 will give some evidence on the value of this option, although most of the programs consolidated into Chapter 2 were very small and relatively unimportant to districts. Looking beyond education, there is some existing evidence on the advantages and disadvantages of block grants (Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, 1977). While the shift to such grants does increase flexibility in local decisionmaking, some other likely consequences make the option seem less attractive. In the past, program consolidation has very often been followed by a reimposition of categorical divisions, resulting in little net change after a period of upheaval. Moreover, because block grants have typically attracted smaller appropriations than the corresponding categorical programs, local grant recipients pay a price in support for an increase in flexibility of governance. In many fiscally strained school districts, this tradeoff would not be welcome.

A final option for state or federal policymakers is to capitalize on the strengths of the current intergovernmental system, when it works properly. Recent research (Knapp et al., 1983;

Moore et al., 1983) has drawn attention to the considerable amount of problem solving and negotiation that now go on among levels of government. Local educators do recognize the problems that arise in managing programs, such as that of coordinating multiple programs of instruction, and they take steps to solve these problems. Perhaps the most helpful stance for state and local officials to take is to recognize such problem-solving efforts, publicize them, offer incentives for them, and remove impediments to them. To some extent, they already do so.

Concluding Observations

This paper has had two aims: to analyze the array of environmental systems that provide governance and support to schools and districts, and to draw research-based lessons about the local management of the constraints and opportunities provided. Because the array of support and governance systems is complex, local decisionmakers are faced with a challenge in making it comprehensible, let alone useful. However, some lessons do emerge from past experience. If there is one overriding theme, it is that the specialization of outside systems and district management by programs has both benefits and costs. A fragmented environment can be mirrored in fragmented local programs that are inimical to comprehensive school improvement. A task for local managers is to take advantage of specialization where possible (using the outside resource system that has expertise tailored to a particular local problem, for example), but to resist the balkanization of the school or district into specialized empires.

REFERENCE NOTES

1. Peterson, S. M. Unpublished synthesis of information on state initiatives for educational quality, Bay Area Research Group, Palo Alto, Calif., 1982.

2. Crandall, D. P., Bauchner, J. E., Loucks, S., & Schmidt, W. H. Models of the school improvement process: Factors contributing to success. The NETWORK, Inc., Andover, Mass. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, March 1982.

3. Cox, P. L. Inside-out and outside-in: Configurations of assistance and their impact on school improvement efforts. The NETWORK, Inc., Andover, Mass. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, April 1983.

REFERENCES

Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations. Block grants: A comparative analysis. Washington, D.C.: Author, 1977.

Berman, P., & McLaughlin, M. W. Federal programs supporting educational change, Vol. 8. Implementing and sustaining innovations. Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corp., 1978.

Cohen, D. K. Policy and organization: The impact of state and federal educational policy on school governance. Harvard Educational Review, 1982, 52 (4), 474-499.

David, J. L. School improvement and programs for special populations: Finance and government linkages. In Odden, A., & Webb, L. D. (Eds.) School finance and school improvement: Linkages in the 1980s. Washington, D.C.: American Education Finance Association.

Huberman, M., & Miles, M. Innovation up close: A field study in twelve school settings. Andover, Mass.: The NETWORK, Inc., 1983.

Knapp, M. S., Stearns, M. S., Turnbull, B. J., David, J. L., & Peterson, S. M. Cumulative effects of federal education policies on schools and districts. Menlo Park, Calif.: SRI International, January 1983.

Lannon, W. C. Response. Harvard Educational Review, 1982, 52 (4), 532-534.

Louis, K. S., Rosenblum, S., & Molitor, J. A. Strategies for knowledge use and school improvement. Cambridge, Mass.: Abt Associates, Inc., 1981.

McDonnell, L. M., & McLaughlin, M. W. Education policy and the role of the states. Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corp., 1982.

Meyer, J. W. The impact of the centralization of educational funding and control on state and local organizational governance. Program Report No. 79-B20. Stanford, Calif.: Institute for Educational Finance and Governance, Stanford University, August 1979.

Moore, M. T., & Associates. The interactions of federal and related state education programs. Washington, D.C.: Educational Testing Service, 1983.

National Center for Education Statistics. The condition of education. Washington, D.C.: Author, 1981.

Schon, D.A. A review of "The Federal role in curriculum development, 1950-1980." Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 1981, 3 (5), 55-61.

Seidman, H. Politics, position, and power: The dynamics of federal organization. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970.

Stephens Associates. Education service agencies: Status and trends. Burtonsville, Md.: Author, 1979.

Turnbull, B. J. Federal linkage alternatives: Types of help provided for school improvement by dissemination and technical assistance systems. Durham, N.C.: NTS Research Corp., 1981.

Turnbull, B. J. The federal role in educational improvement. Harvard Educational Review, 1982, 52 (4), 514-528.

Weatherley, R., & Lipsky, M. Street-level bureaucrats and institutional innovation: Implementing special-education reform. Harvard Educational Review, 1977, 47 (2), 171-197.

Williams, W., & Elmore, R. F. Social program implementation. New York: Academic Press, 1976.

Winslow, H. R., & Peterson, S. M. State initiatives for special needs populations. Palo Alto, Calif.: Bay Area Research Group, 1981.